

Meditation practices in preparation for death

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Preparing in Advance for Death: Practices for Strengthening Dharma View (Taken from several talks and Question and Answer sessions given by Kilung Rinpoche in 2014 and 2015)

Basic Practices

We can bring benefit to all beings as a result of our involvement with bodhicitta and refuge prayers, which we then dedicate to the awakening of all beings. Then, over time, we may go beyond saying prayers. Becoming inspired, we bring bodhicitta heart-mind into our actions of everyday life. We might begin to practice the Six Paramitas [transcendent generosity, patience, discipline, diligence, concentration, and wisdom].

When you hear the teachings of the masters, often they begin with the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind to Dharma [precious human life, impermanence, karma, the suffering of samsara]. (These are elaborated upon in the Longchen Nyinthik Ngöndro manual.) *Impermanence* is especially important in preparing your mind for death. The old Kadampa masters and yogis of Tibet—who often practiced for long periods in caves—contemplated the Four Thoughts very seriously, especially impermanence. In doing so they would concentrate on the present—“What will I do today?”—and if they survived until the next day—*something they wouldn’t take for granted*—only then would they think about the next day. They would turn over their eating bowl when they went to sleep [something done only when someone has died], and not keep the embers of their fires going at night, (which meant that they would have to go out to the village each morning in order to get some hot coals to make a fire for cooking breakfast). Such was their attention to impermanence.

The study of impermanence is part of western science, so it is something we are already familiar with. The decay of organic and inorganic phenomena has been studied for centuries in physics, biology, and chemistry. And modern physics sees the subatomic world that underlies our visible, sensed universe much in the same way the Buddhist teachings do: particles having no fixed

reality and are constantly in flux. And, of course, we needn't be blind to the death and transformation of life all around us—from microorganisms to our friends, our relatives, and ourselves. Observing and contemplating impermanence, we can gain confidence that this is natural and that there is no need for us to become panicked and obsessed with death and impermanence. Rather, we can become aware with relaxation. Knowing it as reality, we will have no fear of impermanence—we get beyond any neurosis in that regard, beyond pretense and denial.

In fact, impermanence is of the same nature as emptiness—everything is the unity of impermanence and emptiness. Kilung Rinpoche elaborates: *“Recall the famous quote from the Heart Sutra: ‘Form is emptiness and emptiness is form. Form is none other than emptiness and emptiness is none other than form.’ We tend to believe that all the phenomena we encounter in life are real, have true existence—we believe that. But impermanence and emptiness include all phenomena and therefore all beings. There is nothing that can exist on its own without impermanence-emptiness. The fact that everything appears and disappears demonstrates that. If you recognize the true nature of samsara and its beings, you realize that this goes beyond the physical, and seeing that you develop a deep sense of connection with indivisible inner nature and luminosity. Then you will develop confidence during this lifetime and discover happiness in the present moment that expands all the way to the time of death. This confidence will illuminate your path journey after journey.”*

“So don't be attached to this physical body we are going to lose. Remember that form is emptiness and therefore this body is empty—is illusory. But it is not nothingness. It appears. Appearance and emptiness are the same. A dependent arising, such as ‘the body,’ is ‘made’ by time, and the elements, and events like your parents, your karma, etc., etc. It has arisen through causes and conditions upon which its appearance depends. Impermanence is the heart of dependent arising/interdependence and emptiness. As a dependent arising, a phenomenon like the body cannot be really identified—it is empty of a singular identity. Dependent arising is emptiness. Seeing that causes you to lose attachment and brings relaxation.”

Shamatha (a.k.a. *shi-ney*, calm abiding; leading to meditative absorption—*samadhi*)

One-pointed meditation is of course very helpful in general and also because the mind in distraction is the habit of samsara and could be a major problem in our journey [through the bardo]. Distraction is what is actually arising and the cause of our wandering around, so it is good to develop the mental habit of not always being in distraction. Shamatha meditation will help you develop skillful mental qualities and focus, but don't develop a forceful focus. Instead, develop relaxation as you focus. So be careful with the practice of one-pointed meditation. Depending on how you manipulate it, shamatha's focus can be like a beam of light that is either wide or narrow. Don't allow it to become too sharp and narrow. Practiced properly, shamatha grounds you.

Shi-ney is great value on the journey of death because it brings peace. It is a great gift wherein you can rest and be less distracted. Shamatha will help you to relax when the symptoms and disturbances of dying begin to appear. Having trained in shamatha you will have confidence. It is similar to riding a horse: If you feel your horse is well trained you can be confident that you can ride in any circumstance without falling off. Shamatha is also helpful for developing dream yoga.

Phowa

It is highly recommended to become familiar with phowa through regular practice as a preparation for death.

You are able to perform phowa for yourself during the outer and inner dissolutions up until the ceasing of the inner breath at the end of the inner dissolutions, which is when we die. There are basically three types of phowa, differing by their procedures, degree of simplicity, and speed. The descriptions below are general. The details should be requested from your teacher.

Nirmanakaya Phowa is done with the traditional visualization of yourself as Vajrayogini—with the central channel (*uma*) visualized opening at the crown of the head (the *tsan buk*).

Consciousness is visualized as a red syllable *Hri* which ascends the central channel and is then ejected (usually by uttering or, if necessary, imagining the sound “Hik” or “Phat”) into the visualization of Amitabha an arms-length above your head. Ejecting consciousness in this way will allow your consciousness to be reborn in Amitabha’s pure land, *Dewachen*.

Sambhogakaya Phowa is based on deity practice and uses the generation stage of visualizing yourself as the deity and the completion stage of merging with primordial purity (*rigpa*). (This is, of course, a very basic description of the practice.)

Dharmakaya Phowa is extremely quick and simple and is based on your stability and confidence in Dzogchen practice. You recognize that there is no duality of life and death and “merge” with primordial purity spontaneously (in the sense that you have never been anything other than primordial purity). Perhaps some reminder is necessary at the start such as asking yourself, “Do you remember?” or saying “Ah,” “Hung,” “Hik,” or “Phat.” You can use one of these syllables as a “signal” for the instant, Dharmakaya Phowa.

The point is, since you have time now to practice, develop familiarity and confidence in whichever of these styles you choose (or all of them). Then, when death approaches, practice them more intensely so that when you are dying phowa will be familiar and natural for you.

Timing: The best time to perform phowa—if you are confident you can do so—is right after your final breath at the end of the outer dissolutions. However, Rinpoche suggests that you start earlier when you recognize the outer dissolutions are beginning. As mentioned above, once you have passed through the inner dissolutions and the inner breath has ceased you will not be able to perform phowa yourself.

General Amitabha Practice

The Tibetan Buddhist teachings say that the strong aspiration to be reborn in Amitabha's pure land, *Dewachen*, can result in your rebirth there—even if you are not a strong practitioner and/or you have accumulated significant negative karma in this and past lives. The basic practice is to frequently visualize Amitabha in *Dewachen*, recount to yourself its qualities, and to repeat often the mantra of Amitabha: OM AMI DEWA HRI or OM AMITABHA HRI. (Details of this practice and the visualization can be found in *Peaceful Death, Joyous Rebirth* by Tulku Thondup, and an elaborate prayer to Amitabha with a good description of *Dewachen* by Karma Chagme can be found online.)

Shitro (A practice of the 100 Peaceful and Wrathful Deities)

Shitro introduces us to the images we will see in the bardo, some of which are terrifying. After dying, our mental images and imprints from samsara can also be scary. But if we understand their nature, we know they are just reflections of our own emotions. The shitro deities are a special kind of image that we train on in order to gain confidence about those deities.

Enlightened masters such as Guru Rinpoche, observing the minds of sentient beings, see that the images we are terrified by are just reflections of our own mental perception—not something coming from somewhere outside. When we see these scary images, we run away from them, which is basically like falling off the path. So what we need to do is move straight forward and recognize these images as reflections of our own minds—that is the path. If we are open-hearted when they appear, we will recognize them as your own enlightened perception. Liberation comes from this recognition, from not fearing them but knowing their nature.

Different cultures may generate their own “scary images.” And everything we experience in our lives will show up in the bardo. The images you experience may differ from the shitro deities. Shamatha is a practice enabling us to be relaxed with any appearing images—scary or peaceful. Here is something to try if you think your meditation is stable: Go to an IMAX movie theater and see a horror or violence movie and try to relax your mind—see how that goes. See if your mind and emotions can remain relaxed in that situation. Another test would be to try to remain calm and relax in a turbulent environment, like downtown New York.

Using the Bardo Thödol (*Tibetan Book of the Dead*)

Familiarization with the *Bardo Thödol* is a great aid for finding liberation in the dying process and for navigating the bardo. (The book's subtitle is “The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo.”) In the bardos one's consciousness (and memory) is many times more acute and attentive. If one has read frequently or memorized all or parts of this guide (written by Padmasambhava), there is a good chance they will be remembered in the bardo and you can use this advice to attain liberation or a favorable rebirth. The key instruction given by Padmasambhava for liberation in the bardo is to recognize that all the phenomena you experience are reflections of your own mind—they are not coming from somewhere “outside.” Thus one realizes that all phenomena are empty of true existence and one is liberated.

You can have the *Bardo Thödol* read to you as you are dying and during the traditional period of 49 days after your death. To enact this practice for someone else, visualize the deceased person before you and imagine they are hearing as you read. It will get through—they will hear it in the bardo. If they would like to hear it, you can read the *Bardo Thödol* to a dying person familiar with the Dharma, the bardos, etc., as a reminder.

Note that there is a good recording of the *Bardo Thödol* read in Tibetan by Alak Zenkar Rinpoche available. Richard Gere has recorded it in English (reading the Trungpa/Fremantle edition). These may be helpful if played when one is dying. Leonard Cohen has narrated a documentary on these teachings in their cultural setting (“The Tibetan Book of the Dead—Part 1: A Way of Life, Part 2: The Great Liberation”).

Yidam Practice

When death arrives, you can call on any deity you feel a connection with. In this case it is not necessary to concern yourself with the elements or Buddha families associated with the yidams because in Vajrayana practice the emphasis is on emptiness. You visualize, you formalize the deity, but once you establish that, you investigate “what that is about” and the answer comes: This is arising from emptiness. This is generated through dependent origination. It is then that we realize that one’s self and the deity or buddha have no separation. Establish that single essence or connection. Once you feel that connection with a specific deity, that taste can bring you into connection with other deities—you will recognize the one similar essence. If, for instance, you have a strong connection with Vajrasattva, you may practice Vajrasattva or some other deity—it is all of one essence. Vajrasattva is not different from Tara. You can think of each deity as a different door into the same room (primordial purity). The room itself is free of any divisions, it is non-dual. You may prefer to use the green door or the red door or the blue one to enter there—but the room is the same.

The sense of difference you feel depends on your level of confidence, that is what’s most significant. Your level of confidence depends on the depth of your experience. Experience the deity as your own nature. Have confidence that the deity is primordial wisdom not separate from your own mind. This is what’s called Vajra Pride. Once you have that confidence, it doesn’t matter which deity you practice.

Other Practices

Kilung Rinpoche: “Besides Phowa and Shitro, you can do Chenrezig practice, Vajrasattva practice, and Amitabha practice. I also suggest “Bodhicitta-in-Action” kinds of practice, such as the saving of lives of other sentient beings and being helpfully involved with others. All of these involve acts of compassion that are really effective for developing one’s pure heart.

In terms of your general attitude, if you see yourself as a guest and your body as a hotel, and develop this view as a habit, when you die it will be easier since you won’t be so attached to your body.

As a preparation for the outer dissolutions, meditate upon the sensations of the body as arising emptiness. This will also get you out of your head a bit.”